Activism and presence in the times of transformation. Searching for LBTIQ on the crossroads of gender, nationality and religion (Poland 1989-2009)

Agnieszka Weseli

For the purposes of the very recent first national Women Congress in Poland I started the research on activism and presence of lesbians, bisexual women and trans, intersexual and queer persons (LBTIQ) in Polish public life from 1989 until 2009. Being a historian involved in an independent Queerstoria project (researching and recording the history of Polish LBTIQ, especially outside big cities), I also tried to analyse critically the sources that are available at the moment.

Great majority of data carries a brand of the heteronormative perspective, admitting the existence of only two clearly separated sexes/genders and only one psychosexual orientation. The other phenomenon that limits our possibility of using these sources is the neglectful attitude towards women, who are either not taken under consideration or omitted in common language and in research. Homosexuality is identified with male homosexuality ("gay organizations", "gay parades" - in Poland "gay" means male homosexual). Thus public opinion polls concerning homosexuals (not LGBT, as these pools do not take into consideration any other option) from 1988, 1994, as well as the latest ones, do not take into account the gender perspective. Unfortunately the same must be said about the Lambda and Campaign Against Homophobia reports on discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (except the most recent one, for the years of 2005-2006). Heteronormativity and misogyny often come together, resulting in cross discrimination of lesbians and bisexual women. Persons that do not identify as male or female are also subject to stereotypes and discrimination of a different nature that discrimination acts experienced by homosexual males.

In socialist Poland psychosexual orientation was not a political category. Unlike today, homosexuality was not one of the axis of public discourse; moreover, it was not present in common consciousness. Until the end of the 80s it was a domain of medicine doctors, psychiatrists, as well as state security officers, who were all interested in male homosexuals. The Iron Curtain had blocked a second wave of emancipating feminism as well as independence and citizen movements which gave rise to the gay and lesbian movement in Western societies. Socialism preserved the

traditional Polish attitudes of superficial Catholicism, attachment to vague moral values and unwillingness to participate in social and political life. These attitudes were even deepened by Poles' eager turn to the right with the fall of socialism. The LGBT movement was born at the same crucial moment, but within its frame lesbians functioned in ephemeral, closed groups (Lesbian Lambda in Cracow from 1990, Lambda Bilitis in Warsaw from 1992), on the margin, while gays were leaders and frontmen.

The first attempt to change this situation dates from 1998 when OLA-Archiwum - All-Polish Feminist Lesbian Archive association - was officially registered, but its broad activity was limited to closed events. Until 2004 the most popular idea about lesbians (among LGBT activists as well as in the society as a whole, and even among the lesbians - as the research of Joanna Mizielińska indicates) was that they were invisible or even non-existing. The situation changed with empowerment and self-development projects as well as meetings carried by Lesbijka.org, Konsola Women Association and Lambda Warszawa, resulting in formation (in early 2005) of the Lesbian Coalition (LBT), the first feminist-based group struggling exclusively for visibility and public presence of lesbians and bisexuals (however, trans persons were not yet involved in the project, even though its name might suggest otherwise).

As to trans persons, despite legal possibilities that opened after 1989, they did not try to form any organization, unite or strive for visibility - on the contrary, starting from the margin, they tried to join the mainstream of the society. Their priority was to blend into the society in their new role, which they assumed after finishing the transition process and the ID change (which still remains a lengthy legal procedure). There were not more than two local and short-lived support associations founded by non-trans persons. The situation of trans persons changed a lot after 1999, when public health system ceased to refund sex reassignment surgery/process (but not sex correction surgeries of intersexual persons). Doubtlessly, hostile attitudes towards trans persons are influenced by the Catholic Church's doctrine: classic Christian philosophy and theology see transsexuality as a complex of mental disorders; according to the Church, SRS does not change the person's actual sex. Priests reject requests to correct baptism certificates or to perform wedding ceremonies for post-SRS transsexuals. 2008 was an important turning point for Polish trans persons: Trans-Fuzja Foundation was established as the first official organization acting on behalf of TS/TG persons (as well as transvestites/crossdressers).

Activity and presence of LBTQ in Poland must be considered in the light of two dominating public discourses: national and Catholic. The

Polish Constitution of 1997 might be understood as unifying the discourses: as Joanna Mizielińska stated, it reflects the Catholic notion of the family as a communion of a father and a son. The woman is not presented as a citizen, but as a mother. The legal subject that is produced by this basic bill is the heterosexual male. Article 32 says that no one should be discriminated against because of any reason, though - except the Labour Code from 2004 (obligatorily unified with the EU regulations) - discrimination on the basis of psychosexual orientation or identification is not present in the Polish law.

Apart from the law, educational system constitutes another powerful tool of reproducing heteronormativity and misogyny. According to the Ministry of Education program base for the "Preparation to family life" subject (note the way this subject was labeled), homosexual orientation is one of sexual identification disorders, or it results from lack of acceptance of one's sexuality. In most of the textbooks used in Polish schools homosexuality is presented as an aberration, although the World Health Organization deleted if from the list of disorders in 1991. Moreover, very often the "Preparation to family life" subject is taught by priests or nuns.

The position of the Catholic Church in Poland - not established, but strengthened in the socialist era - is still very strong in the areas of politics, economy and morals (all three areas intertwined). According to the 1992 Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Catholic Church is against homosexuality, which is defined as "objectively disorderly behavior". The attention of church officials focuses on male homosexuals who should be subject to "justified discrimination" if they do not reject their sinful sexuality at all.

In the socialist propaganda the homosexual - if he appeared - was seen as the spy from the depraved Western countries and he curiously remained in this role until today, although now he become a "Eurofaggot". The struggle for equal rights is interpreted by conservatives as endangering the "traditional Polish values". This "traditional homophobia" seems to guarantee Polish sovereignty; it is a proof that Poland stands firmly against the liberalizing, mollifying influence of the EU. Just as women in the case of abortion, LGBT people become the object of play in some greater game played behind their backs. According to Agnieszka Graff, over the last few years we have experienced "politicization of sexuality" (and modern homophobia is reincarnated nationalism and anti-Semitism of pre-war Poland). It must be remembered though that, as I already said, there are many kinds of discrimination - the one that affects gay men is different than the one that is directed against nonheterosexual women or persons of ambiguous

identification. The gay man is definitely in the center of the attention of the media, conservative political organizations and average homophobes. "Fags to gas, lesbians to workcamps" was the battle cry of All-Polish Youth in the years of 2004-2006 - it means that the homosexual male can be only exterminated, while women's emotional and sexual choices are not that dangerous/important and there is no need to reject them totally. What's more - they can always be "corrected" (this attitude seems very close to the official ideology of Nazi Germany). It should be noticed that in the conditions of free market and with former censorship abolished pornography production flourished, resulting in "sexualization" of lesbianism. Still, it is present only as a treat for the male customer.

Polish LBTQ - as long as they stay quiet - can benefit from invisibility, although their benefits are rather ambivalent. The reasons of this convenient invisibility, at least in the case of lesbians and bisexual women, are not at all obvious: is it traditional leniency towards women who are deemed as more emotional and soft, or, as Judith Butler says, overwhelming fear of something that can not and should not even exist? This is one of the research questions I would like to focus on. The others include: reasons and implications of relative invisibility of lesbians until 2005 and after that date as perceived by lesbians themselves; the same question concerning trans persons and the turning point of 2008; evolution of the lesbian image in the context of gender, national and religious identification and the convergence between the mainstream message (in the media) and the images produced by lesbians themselves in the community media; the bisexual, trans, queer matters and homonormativity; possibilities of queer activism in Poland and its relation to antineoliberal trends as illustrated by Warsaw women-queer sociocultural centre UFA.

Agnieszka Weseli